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Combating Terrorism: In Search of a National Strategy

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**Testimony of Dr. Bruce Hoffman
Director, RAND Washington Office**

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**The opinions and conclusions expressed in this written testimony are the
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COMBATING TERRORISM: IN SEARCH OF A NATIONAL STRATEGY

Statement of Bruce Hoffman,*
Director, RAND Washington Office

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee on this important issue. Clearly, much has been done in recent years to ensure that America is prepared to counter the threat of terrorism. Yet, despite the many new legislative and programmatic initiatives, budgetary increases, and the intense governmental concern and attention they evince, America's capabilities to defend itself against the threat of terrorism and to preempt or respond to such attacks, arguably still remain inchoate and unfocused. Last November's suicide attack on the *U.S.S. Cole* tragically underscored these continued vulnerabilities. Indeed, within the United States it is by no means certain that we would be better able today to address an Oklahoma City-like bombing scenario than we were six years ago.¹

The issue in constructing an effective counterterrorism policy is, however, no longer the question of more attention, bigger budgets and increased staffing that it once was: but of a need for greater focus, a better appreciation of the problem and firmer understanding of the threat, and, in turn, the development of a comprehensive national strategy. My testimony this morning will discuss how the absence of such a strategy has hindered our counterterrorism efforts

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¹ This at least was the consensus following a series of discussions by the author with state and local first responders (police, fire and emergency services personnel) in Oklahoma, Idaho, and Florida during April and August 2000.

by focusing on the critical importance of threat assessments in the development of such a national strategy.

The title of this hearing, “combating terrorism: in search of a national strategy” is particularly apt. Notwithstanding the many accomplishments in recent years towards building a counterterrorism policy, there still remains the conspicuous absence of an overarching strategy. As the Gilmore Commission² observed in its first annual report to the President and the Congress in December 1999, the promulgation of a succession of policy documents and presidential decision directives³ neither equates to, nor can substitute for, a truly “comprehensive, fully coordinated national strategy.”⁴ The effect, that report concluded, was that the multiplicity of Federal agencies and programs concerned with combating terrorism were inevitably fragmented and uncoordinated—replete with overlapping responsibilities, duplication of effort and lacking clear focus.

The articulation and development of such a strategy is not simply an intellectual exercise, but must be at the foundation of any effective counterterrorism policy. Failure to do so, for example, has often undermined the counterterrorism efforts of other democratic nations: producing frustratingly ephemeral, if not sometimes, nugatory effects and, in some cases, proving counterproductive in actually reducing the threat. This was among the key findings of a 1992 RAND study that examined, through the use of select historical case studies,⁵ the fundamental requirements of an effective counterterrorism policy.⁶ Hence, the continued absence of a national strategy threatens to negate the progress thus far achieved by the U.S. both in

² Formally known as the Advisory Panel to Assess Domestic Response Capabilities for Terrorism Involving Weapons of Mass Destruction, but often referred to as the Gilmore Commission in recognition of its chairman, Governor James S. Gilmore III.

³ E.g., the “Five Year Interagency Counter-Terrorism Plan” and PDDs 39, 62 and 63.

⁴ The Advisory Panel to Assess Domestic Response Capabilities For Terrorism Involving Weapons of Mass Destruction, *I. Assessing the Threat*, 15 December 1999, p. 56.

⁵ Among the cases examined were the counterterrorist campaigns prosecuted by Britain, West Germany, and Italy.

⁶ It is perhaps worth quoting one sentence of that report in full: “The report’s most important conclusion was arguably that individual application of selected tactics and policies without a comprehensive national plan can prolong a conflict or even lead to complete failure” (p. 2). For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see pp. 136-140 in Bruce Hoffman and Jennifer Morrison Taw, *A Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Insurgency* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, N-3506-DOS, 1992).

countering and defending against terrorism. What is required, as the Gilmore Commission's two successive annual reports have argued, is the elucidation of a comprehensive, fully-coordinated strategy for the entire federal government, with specific direction provided by the President in consultation with all of his senior advisors who have responsibility for related federal efforts. This also must be accompanied by a comprehensive effort that seeks to knit together more tightly, and provide greater organizational guidance and focus, to individual state and local preparedness and planning efforts in order to minimize duplication and maximize coordination.

A critical prerequisite in framing such an integrated national strategy is the tasking of a comprehensive net assessment of the terrorist threat, both foreign and domestic, as it exists today and is likely to evolve in the future.⁷ There has been no new, formal foreign terrorism net assessment for at least the past six years. Moreover, the means do not currently exist to undertake a comprehensive domestic terrorism net assessment. In addition, the last comprehensive national intelligence estimate (NIE) regarding foreign terrorist threats—a prospective, forward-looking effort to predict and anticipate future terrorist trends—was conducted nearly a decade ago.⁸ Although a new NIE is currently underway, given the profound changes in the nature, operations and mindset of terrorists we have seen in recent years, such an estimate is arguably long over-due. Although the National Intelligence Council's wide-ranging *Global Trends 2015* effort was a positive step in this direction, surprisingly

⁷ This same argument has been made repeatedly by Henry L. Hinton, Jr., Assistant Comptroller General, National Security and International Affairs Division, U.S. General Accounting Office, before the Subcommittee on National Security, Veterans Affairs, and International Relations, Committee on Government Reform, U.S. House of Representatives in (1) "Combating Terrorism: Observation on Federal Spending to Combat Terrorism," 11 March 1999; and (2) "Combating Terrorism: Observation on the Threat of Chemical and Biological Terrorism," 20 October 1999; as well as by John Parachini in "Combating Terrorism: Assessing the Threat" before the same House subcommittee on 20 October 1999; and the Hinton testimony "Combating Terrorism: Observation on Biological Terrorism and Public Health Initiatives," before the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs and Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Subcommittee, Senate Committee on Appropriations, GAO/T-NSIAD-99-12, General Accounting Office Washington, D.C., 16 March 1999.

⁸ It should however be noted that two subsequent NIEs reportedly produced in 1995 and 1997 more narrowly examined potential future foreign terrorist threats *in* the U.S. only.

minimal attention was paid to terrorism, in the published open-source version at least.⁹

The failure to conduct such comprehensive net assessments on a more regular basis is palpable. Indeed, in this critical respect our collective policy mindset on terrorist threats arguably remains locked in a 1995-96 time frame, when the defining incidents of that period, such as the Tokyo nerve gas attack and the Oklahoma City bombing, fundamentally shaped and influenced our thinking about counterterrorism policy requirements and responses. These events were described as unmistakable harbingers of a profound and potentially catastrophic change in the nature of terrorism: pointing to a new era of terrorism far more lethal and bloody than before.¹⁰ Indeed, at the time two successive DCIs (Director, Central Intelligence) warned unequivocally of dangerous trends and dire consequences. Terrorism, James Woolsey averred in 1994, "is getting worse faster than it is getting better";¹¹ and two years later his successor, John Deutch, confirmed that assessment, cautioning that the intelligence community "has been predicting growth in lethality of international terrorism for some time."¹²

Yet, the changes in terrorist weaponry and tactics that would ineluctably result in greater terrorist lethality—accompanied by the world-wide surge in terrorism that was predicted to occur and would specifically target the U.S. (the "new terrorism's" principal nemesis)—never really materialized. Perceptions to the contrary, the streets of the world hardly run red with American blood. During the 1990s, for example, a total of 87 Americans were killed in a total 1,372 attacks perpetrated against U.S. targets overseas. By contrast, approximately six times as many Americans (571) perished in the 1,701 attacks

⁹ National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2015: A Dialogue About the Future With Non-government Experts*, December 2000.

¹⁰ See, among other publications, for example, Steven Simon and Daniel Benjamin, "America and the New Terrorism," *Survival*, vol. 42, no. 1 (Spring 2000), pp. 59-75.

¹¹ Quoted in David B. Ottaway, "U.S. Considers Slugging It Out With International Terrorism," *Washington Post*, 17 October 1996.

¹² "Fighting Foreign Terrorism," John Deutch, Director of Central Intelligence, Georgetown University – 5 September 1996, p. 2. See also R. Jeffrey Smith, "Critics 'Wrong,' CIA Chief Says," *Washington Post*, 6 1996.

recorded during the 1980s.¹³ There is of course no doubt that terrorism poses a dangerous threat to Americans traveling or working abroad and whatever the number of killed and injured overseas it is incontestably tragic that any American should lose his or her life to violence or be wantonly harmed and injured simply because of the nationality of the passport they carry, the uniform they wear, or the job they perform. But the fact remains that, so far as international terrorism is concerned, the world was a far more dangerous place for Americans in the 1980s, when on average 16 Americans were killed per terrorist attack on a U.S. target, than during the 1990s when the supposedly more lethal "new terrorism" on average claimed the lives of 3 persons per anti-U.S. attack.

Nor is the situation terribly different so far as terrorism in the U.S. itself is concerned. Six years later, the anti-federalist, white supremacist revolution that the Oklahoma City bomber, Timothy McVeigh, and his identified confederates hoped both to inspire and provoke appears to have fizzled completely. While the seditious motivations that lay behind the attack doubtless still exist in parts of the U.S., they nonetheless have not gained the widespread currency and popularity that at the time was feared. In this respect, the wave of domestic terrorism and violence that many worried would break across the country in the wake of that tragic event has not come to pass. In fact, according to FBI statistics, far fewer terrorist incidents were recorded in the U.S. during the 1990s, than during the previous decade. The FBI lists a total of 220 domestic terrorist acts as having been perpetrated between 1980 and 1989; compared to a mere 29 incidents for the period 1990 to 1998 (the last year for which published data is available from the FBI). Admittedly, 176 persons were killed by terrorists in the U.S. during the 1990s: a figure nearly seven times the 1980s total of just 26 persons. However, this tragic death toll is the result of four out of only 29 terrorist incidents: and of the four incidents, it was one especially heinous act—the Oklahoma City bombing—which accounts for the overwhelming majority—e.g., 95 percent—of the total.¹⁴ Once again, there is no doubt that

¹³ Statistics compiled by the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, U.S. State Department. See also, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 1999* (Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of State Publication 10687, April 2000), p. 1.

¹⁴ Statistics compiled from Terrorist Research and Analytical Center, Terrorism Section, Criminal Investigative Division, *FBI Analysis Of Terrorist Incidents In The United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1984), p.

terrorism remains a threat to the lives and well-being of Americans in our own country, but it must be kept in mind that the *actual* number of terrorist incidents—as opposed to the hundreds of hoaxes, often involving alleged chemical and biological agents, that the FBI and other law enforcement and public safety agencies now routinely respond to and which arguably have fueled our perception of a burgeoning, *actual* domestic terrorist threat—remains remarkably few and those that cause fatalities still less.¹⁵

The above arguments, it should be emphasized, are not meant to suggest that the U.S. should become at all complacent about the threat of terrorism (domestic or international) or should in any way relax our vigilance either at home or abroad. Rather they highlight an asymmetry between perception and reality that a comprehensive, integrated threat assessment could redress. The principal danger we arguably face is that by succumbing to intense fears that are not completely grounded in reality, we risk adopting policies and making hard security choices based on misperception and misunderstanding rather than on hard analysis built on empirical evidence of the actual dimensions of the terrorist threat. Terrorism is among the most dynamic of phenomena because of the multiplicity of adversaries (and potential adversaries), the perennial emergence of new causes and different aims and motivations fuelling this violence, the adoption and evolution of new tactics and *modus operandi* and the greater access and availability of increasingly sophisticated weaponry. As France's senior intelligence officer responsible for counterterrorism observed in an interview with the author last May: "terrorism is always

10; *idem.*, *Terrorism in the United States, 1982-1992* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1993), p. 8; Counterterrorism Threat Assessment and Warning Unit, National Security Division, *Terrorism in the United States 1997* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1998), pp. 22-23; and, *idem.*, *Terrorism in the United States 1998* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2000), pp. 3 & 6.

¹⁵ See Statement for the record before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, January 28, 1998, <http://www.fbi.gov/pressrm/congress/congress98/threats.htm> of FBI Director Louis J. Freeh, p. 6; Statement of Robert J. Burnham, Chief, Domestic Terrorism Section before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, May 19, 1999, p.1 at <http://www.fbi.gov/pressrm/congress/congress99/epa.htm>; and, Statement for the Record of Mrs. Barbara J. Martinez, Deputy Director, National Domestic Preparedness Office before the U.S. House of Representatives Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, Subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations, and Emergency Management, June 9, 1999, p.1 at <http://www.fbi.gov/pressrm/congress/congress99/comterr.htm>.

changing. The way I am looking at terrorism today, is not the way I looked at it yesterday.”¹⁶

Without ongoing, comprehensive re-assessments we cannot be confident that the range of policies, countermeasures and defenses we adopt are the most relevant and appropriate ones. A process through which the American intelligence community would conduct at specified intervals regular, and systematic, net assessments of foreign terrorist threats—in addition to the individual, more narrowly focused assessments they are regularly tasked to provide—would be an important means to remedy this situation. However high the quality of this collection of individual assessments, by themselves they do neither comprise nor amount to an integrated, overall net assessment of the threat. Indeed, according to one well-respected American counterterrorism intelligence analyst, the current process produces a “mishmash” of assessments that are not fully coordinated or integrated into a comprehensive, integrated assessment.¹⁷

A mechanism whereby a domestic counterpart to the foreign terrorist net assessment could be undertaken also needs to be implemented and developed. The absence of such a means to gauge and assess trends in domestic terrorism and assess their implications is a major impediment towards framing a cohesive and comprehensive strategy. At one time it was thought that the NDPO (National Domestic Preparedness Organization) within the FBI and Department of Justice would undertake such an effort. The fact that this has not been done raises questions of how such a domestic net assessment should be conducted and which department within what agency would have the lead in collating and articulating the domestic assessment.

Similarly, given that terrorism today has become more complex, amorphous and transnational in nature, the distinction between domestic and international terrorist threats is eroding. Accordingly, a process that facilitates the integration of domestic and foreign assessments might also help to bridge the gap created by the different approaches to addressing the terrorist threat respectively embraced by the law enforcement and intelligence communities in this country. For instance, in recent years terrorism has been regarded more as

¹⁶ Interview, Paris, France, May 2000.

¹⁷ Interview, Washington, D.C., March 2001.

a law enforcement, cum criminal justice, matter than the intelligence and national security issue it also ineluctably is. This approach is problematical, if not dangerously myopic, and deprives the U.S. of a critical advantage in the struggle against terrorism.

In conclusion, it is clear that we need to be absolutely confident that the U.S. is both adequately and appropriately prepared to counter the terrorist threats of today and tomorrow. Accordingly, an essential prerequisite to ensuring that our formidable resources are focused where they can have the most effect is a sober and empirical understanding of the threat coupled with a clear, comprehensive and coherent strategy. Without such a strategy, we risk embracing policies and pursuing solutions that may not only be dated, but may also have become irrelevant; we also lose sight of current and projected trends and patterns and thereby risk preparing to counter and respond to possibly illusory threats and challenges. The development of a comprehensive national strategy to combat terrorism would likely appreciably sustain the progress made in recent years in addressing the threat posed by terrorism to Americans and American interests both here and abroad.